

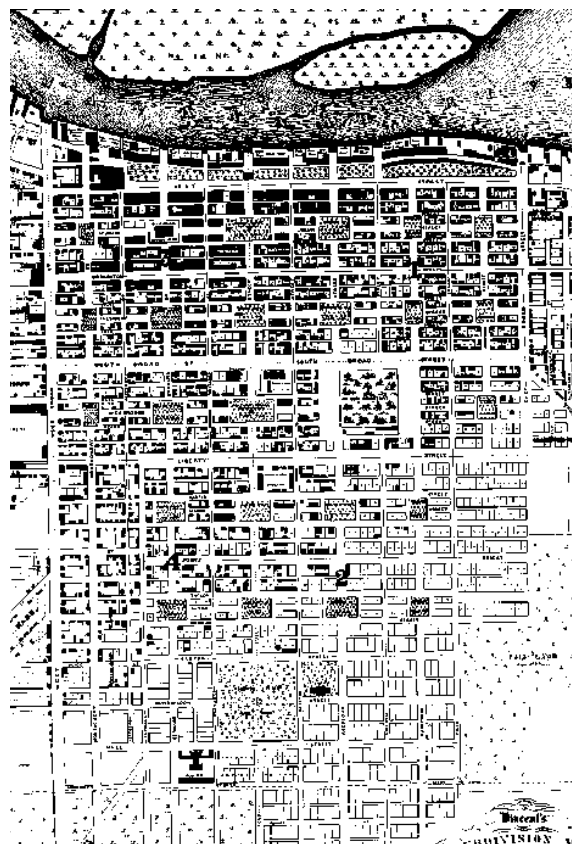
Héctor M. Abreu-Cintrón

Savannah Students Survey the Community

Edward Vincent's subdivision map demonstrates how the center of Oglethorpe's city of squares developed by 1853. Illustration courtesy Historic Urban Plans.

Since 1994, the Historic Preservation Department of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) has undertaken an intensive building-by-building survey to better understand the nature of the historic resources within the National Historic Landmark District of Savannah, Georgia. This multi-year commitment of the faculty and students of the college, with the guidance of the National Park Service's National Register Programs Division, in Atlanta, Georgia, has produced a rich and extensive database of over 1,500 Georgia State Site Survey Forms, for future preservation planning and interpretative purposes. It has also provided the students of SCAD's Historic Preservation Department with the experience of contributing to the assessment of our nation's heritage.

The city of Savannah is one of the loveliest cities in the United States. A jewel in the Southern crown, it is sited on the bluffs above the Savannah River on the coastal region of southern Georgia. Savannah's Colonial English history begins in 1733, when General James Oglethorpe founded the city. His city plan marked the shape of the early community because he established a geometric grid of squares, surrounded by regular, equidistant streets. These squares were uniformly distributed,

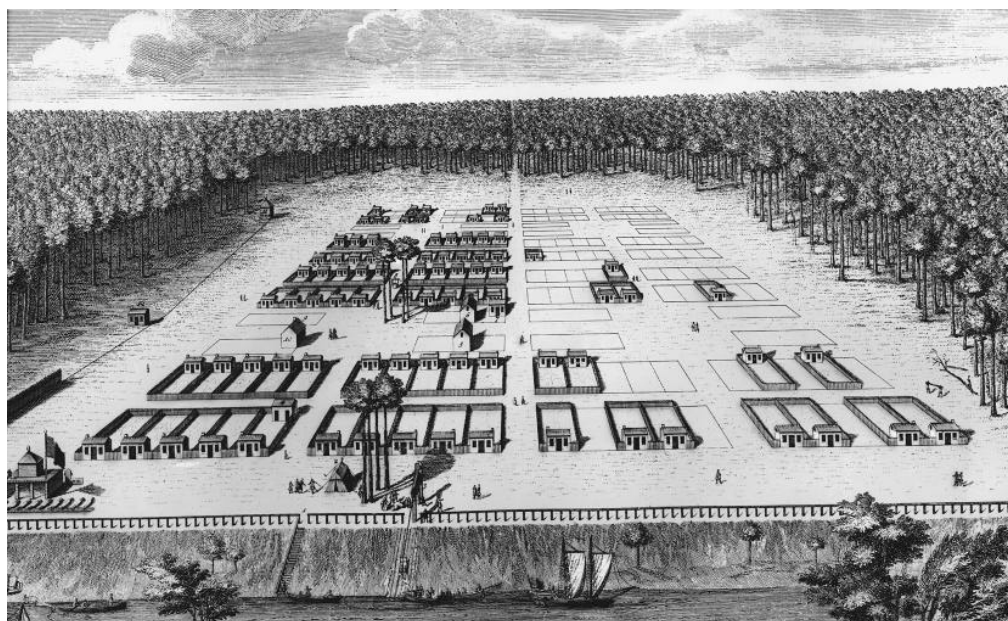


creating a series of green open spaces now used for public enjoyment. Theories attempting to explain their original purpose abound. Some theorize that the squares were for defensive purposes, places where the local militia could assemble during an attack, thus dispersing the forces equally throughout the city. Others have felt that the squares were social gathering places, needed to create a sense of communing with nature because residents of Savannah were never far from a square.

Whichever the reason for Oglethorpe's scheme, his original six squares grew to 24, creating a cityscape that is singular in the United States.

Recognizing the significance of the downtown, the Secretary of the Interior designated the Savannah Historic District a National Historic Landmark (NHL) on November 3, 1966. The designation has proven to be of limited use, however. The boundary description for the district, in keeping with NHL standards at the time, relied heavily on the historical significance of the plan, but said comparatively little about the nature of the architectural resources. Unfortunately, with

James Oglethorpe's unusual plan is captured in the 1734 birdseye view drawn by Peter Gordon for the English Trustees of the Colony. Illustration courtesy Historic Plans.

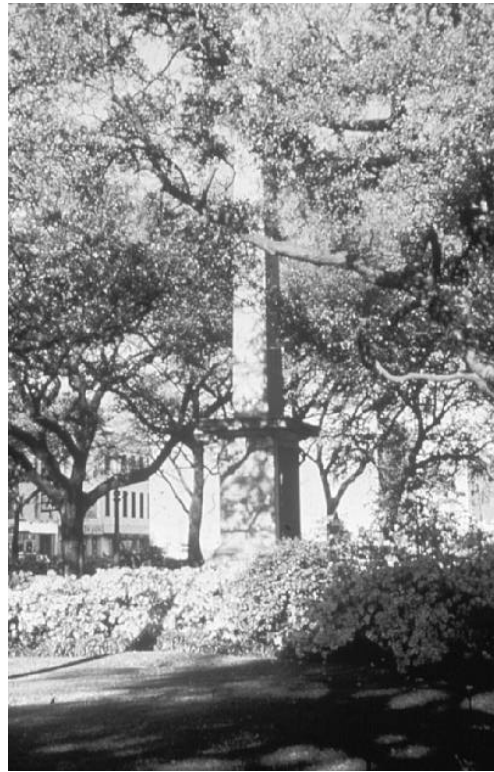


Johnson Square is one of the 21 surviving squares of Savannah. Photo courtesy SCAD Slide Library.

little attention paid to what structures were considered “contributing” to the significance of the district, Section 106 cases repeatedly encountered problems for planners because the database was incomplete. This hampered decision-making.

Sited throughout the city are over 1,000 significant properties from the late-18th to the 20th centuries. Buildings of such varied styles as the Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Neoclassic, and examples of colonial buildings are to be found throughout the historic district. Of the peak number of 24 squares, all but three are still in existence and many contain public monuments and stately live oaks, festooned with Spanish moss, giving the public spaces a special feeling of history.

With this background in mind, the Savannah College of Art and Design embarked on the daunting task of reassessing every property within the



NHL district, through coordination with the National Park Service (NPS), the Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the City of Savannah. The students in the Historic Preservation Department’s “Preservation Research and Survey” course undertook this survey. The goals of the course are to provide the student with a solid, working knowledge of the various kinds of historical information available, and a firm understanding of the various methods used for proper documentation. It seemed logical that a coordinated effort would involve the preservation agencies and students. The students

proceeded to examine each property within the district and used Georgia’s computerized State Site Survey forms, following the guidelines of the HPD. Every structure in the district was photographed, regardless of whether it was considered contributing or not, and information collected about its style, dates of construction, and character.

For example, four distinct types of Savannah Italianate residences were described. All four classes feature elaborate ironwork on the railings and the balconies projecting from the front facade. Arched windows are crowned with heavy, decorative hoods and wide overhanging eaves, supported by decorative brackets. Only one Savannah type features quoins, however, an element frequently seen in other urban areas of the country.

Dozens of SCAD students have participated in this survey over the last three years, along with more than a few faculty members, each contributing to the goal. It is expected that the entire district, with well over 1,500 properties, will be completely surveyed by early 1998. This information will be shared with the community, the SHPO, and the NPS, to assist in Section 106 activities and enable the existing NHL to be revised. Hence, the students at SCAD and Savannah benefit, now and in the future.

Héctor M. Abreu-Cintrón is a Professor in the Historic Preservation Department at the Savannah College of Art and Design.



The Italianate townhouse at 10 East Taylor Street is one of 1,500 buildings to be surveyed. Photo courtesy SCAD Slide Library.